

A Discourse

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF

REV. EPHRAIM PEABODY, D. D.,

PASTOR OF KING'S CHAPEL, BOSTON :

PREACHED BEFORE

The First Congregational Society, New Bedford,

December 7, 1856.

BY JOHN WEISS.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE SOCIETY.

NEW BEDFORD :
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A meeting of the First Congregational Society in New-Bedford, was held at the close of the morning service, December 7, to make some public expression of the feeling of the Society at the death of their former Pastor, Rev. Ephraim Peabody. Hon. Joseph Grinnell was called to the chair. Hon. John Henry Clifford introduced, with a few appropriate expressions of his own personal feeling and of the warm regard entertained for Mr. Peabody by this community, the following resolutions, which were unanimously adopted and ordered to be printed: and Hon. J. H. Clifford, Hon. T. D. Eliot and Mr. Thomas Cook were appointed the Committee under the last resolution.

Resolved, That this Church and Society have received, with the deepest sorrow, the intelligence of the death of their former Pastor, the Rev. Ephraim Peabody. It has thus pleased Him, in whose hands are the issues of life, to close on earth a career of wide-spread Christian usefulness and influence, such as few of His servants have so faithfully filled. We bow to this decree, in that spirit of reverent submission to the Almighty Will, which, in all our griefs and sorrows while he was with us, his counsels and his example taught us to cherish: and we should fail to exhibit the fruits of those counsels, and the force of that example, if this event did not impress us anew with a sense of gratitude to God for the inestimable privilege we enjoyed, of listening to the wise and affectionate teachings, of witnessing the beneficent and blameless life, and of sharing in the priceless friendship of one, whose presence for many years, was a light in all our homes, and whose disinterested goodness had endeared him to all our hearts.

Resolved, That we tender to his bereaved family the sincerest sympathy of this Church and Society, in their great sorrow, and commend them to that only source of consolation, to which their daily communion with his pure, and now perfected spirit, taught them to look, in such an hour, as a sure and sufficient refuge.

Resolved, That a Committee be appointed to request of the Rev. Mr. Weiss a copy of the impressive discourse to which we have just listened; and that they cause the same to be published, as a beautiful and just delineation of the character of Mr. Peabody, and as a fitting tribute and testimonial from this Church and Society, to the memory of their former Pastor and Friend.

Discourse.

PHILIPPIANS, IV, 8.

Whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report.

IN this house, which the departed servant of God first dedicated to truth and worship, let some memorial be raised to him. You called him first to these walls, and his were the prayers which first made them enclose a sanctuary for your tenderest thoughts and best aspirations. His regard first associated each pew in this place with the name and fortunes of a family: and overlooking you from this pulpit, he watched parents depart and children come. The same holy sentiments which, under his ministry, connected these pews with the invisible church, now bring you into communion at his grave. There, your recollection

of his services and a consideration of his character, will be a monument, such as even his unambitious heart might ask for, and one that he would value above the most costly material of earth.

At length we say to each other—"He is gone!" We knew not when his pure and gentle light would disappear, but we knew for many months that it was sinking; we began early to reckon the varied traits of that excellence which we should have to surrender, but all such thoughts were held in suspense, and all words have been hushed, till the close gives us permission to speak what we think and feel. Those who knew him well have till now seemed to be within the chamber of his weakness, where even the comments of tenderness must respect the lingering presence. But now he is gone, let us say all we know and acknowledge all we feel. Let us tell what a loss we have been expecting. He, alas—can be no check upon the freedom of our utterance; the simplicity which we remember restrains us not.

Yet if it be still possible for a departed man to receive an impression from the world he has just left, his feeling will be nothing but gratitude to God when he finds that Christian service is recognized. The warmest tribute of his best friend, though his whole soul would glow with thanksgiving to be conscious of it, is less to him now than the avowal, made on earth and repeated in heaven, that his faithfulness has profited much. How many modest men have to walk doubtfully in their own shadow, till death lets in a serene and pervading consciousness that their gifts have been well directed. For what hesitating, self-depreciating soul can withstand the sweet convictions that assail it, when heavenly voices add their authority to our words of affectionate gratitude, as they say — "Well done, good and faithful servant?" If you feel that you owe him anything, if you can recal a single season of your life when the strength of his faith upheld you, or the sweetness of his spirit modified your griefs, let it be a plea-

sure to think that this is now revealed to him, and that his bliss springs from the assurance that he has done you good.

For it was the object of his life, to do some good. That kept every gift subordinate. And the different epochs of his life are not to be designated by the ordinary dates. We need not take the trouble to mention when his ministry commenced, or when he transferred it from place to place, when his labors were suspended by ill health, or when he sought the relaxation of travel. If we really desired to make up the chronicle of his life we should have to know what sermons, full of his sincere convictions, enlarged your minds or fell warmly on your hearts, what prayer directed the fluttering thoughts of the dying to their Father, what advice gave its color to some undecided day, what unobtrusive effort met the want of the poor, what cheerful conversation lightened the eyes of the miserable. The actual moments of his usefulness would furnish the dates of his

career. Undoubtedly, an ample record of this kind has been preserved, but upon scattered minds and hearts. It can be read connectedly only by the Father who seeth in secret. But if we cannot gather and collate such precious leaves, to produce his veritable history, we can observe the gifts and the spiritual disposition which wrought these unknown moments of his usefulness. And this shall be the memorial of your hearts.

The clearness and precision which belonged to Mr. Peabody's mind, resulted from its large perceptive ability. He did not indulge in trains of abstract thinking, but rather gave unpremeditated expression to all that he gathered by means of this diligent perception. It was a discriminating traveller through the world of books and men, and always brought him the facts in every department that are worth preserving. His mind was sensible because these facts had been well selected: when it came to the point of expression, nothing was vague because the traveller had not

imagined or fabricated anything by the way, but had been content to bring home the simple and obvious realities. This perceptive ability also secured the gracious and lovely traits belonging to each region that it penetrated, so that his statements had a kind of precision unlike that which distinguishes the bare logical faculty: their form was strictly accordant with fact, but life and color were not absent. The successful discoverer always presented the specimens of the climes he visited in their appropriate costume and ornament. His perception included this lively fancy, which preserved every characteristic trait. We were as sure of the corresponding poetry as of the fact itself; and the poetry appeared to be the natural and sensible mode of life which the facts led. If this prevailing ability of his mind seldom entered the region of the imagination, it compensated by the rich variety of life and of experimental knowledge which gave Mr. Peabody his unerring judgment. It appeared intuitive, but it was the result of a

long series of patient observations. The astronomer can tell you on the instant the name of any star which you designate, its magnitude, its condition as fixed or planetary, and its remoteness. But every inch of the firmament has been patiently explored. So had Mr. Peabody observed all kinds of men and women. He was never deceived, though they had all the sameness of the stars and their apparent equidistance from himself. He auscultated with his ear close to the heart. Some people are considered to know human character, who are after all only dealers in scandal. They can travel, like eye-stones, out of sight, and thoroughly explore a single noble organ, but they only gather motes. Mr. Peabody's instinct seemed to be carried clear through a person's circulation and to bring him a faithful report of all the organs. And his search was so free from pique and every sidelong influence, so obviously guided by a preference for things that are of good report, that everybody fearlessly gave up to him the

freedom of their hearts. How genial and conscientious his discourse was about all kinds of people! To hear him bring forth with a few easy strokes some person's nature into sculptural precision, was one of the delights of his society. The strokes were easy, but they were minute and careful and never omitted an essential line, however delicate. You could depend upon his analysis, as a bench of judges can depend upon that of the chemist or the surgeon. After finding him never once mistaken, you accepted the character which he deliberately gave of any person as a sort of fate. What an advantage he possessed in this subtle perception whenever he approached men with advice or consolation. How quietly he would rectify your false impressions of a friend or neighbor, and adjust a variety of minds in the same circle, to keep the same time, though with separate beats. And the treatment of the subjects of his preaching must have depended largely upon this minute knowledge of human diversities.

He read books as he read men, with the same swiftness and completeness: for genius must go to the reading as well as to the writing of a book. He had a feeling of the page: it could not detain him unless it promised his instinct to repay perusal. Some men are obliged to travel through every printed line, before they can pronounce that it is dull. Mr. Peabody wasted no time in these false starts; he seemed to know upon the margin of a tract whether it would be fertile or desert: thus he strode through books with startling rapidity. He sought almost every kind of book that appears in the English language: for this was the necessity of his mind to explore all realms. So that his information represented many departments of human knowledge. This multifarious reading yielded itself up to his capacity for order; and his mind allowed no more jostling among its facts and subjects than it did among its varieties of human character. The same perception which enabled him to read well, lent

its native fancy to the effort of combining well and displaying the analogies of separated facts.

All these qualities and attainments appeared in Mr. Peabody's felicity of conversation. None of the usual words applied to mark the conversation of different men will designate his correctly. It was not impressive, nor impulsive, nor elevated, nor witty, nor brilliant: and yet it was never dull nor common. It was a continuous unpremeditated overflow of clear, sparkling, gentle waters. It appeared as if his mind, having filled up with its natural variety, quietly let it ripple over the margin of his lips. The filtered flow escaped in even measure, not without cheerful and refreshing sounds, but with neither effort nor self-consciousness. It was not a talk, but a release of ideas. A cheerful and serene disposition rested over it, and all day long the same even climate was preserved. Facts from books, from travel and from human life, bright touches of personal characters, sensible results of experience,

were all in this escape of his mind's fulness, with a grave mood occasionally passing over it as from the shadow of a tranquil wing. How willingly he let the mirth of others break into his lapsing talk, and what a pleasant repartee would come, after just a moment's hesitation or lingering over the act, like the occurring of ripples in a serene course. But his mind seemed most naturally engaged in the equable diffusion of its own surplus, to deposit golden instruction and suggestion quietly by the way, not to leap wide in flashes, nor to settle in deep pools. His conversation was the autumn harvesting of a temperate zone.

And his preaching was a more elevated conversation. The same affluence of his prevailing ideas was carried over the solemn subjects of the Christian religion, and his personal faith and piety came down to penetrate and enhance those ideas, but still the serene and simple flow went on. The discourse would warm and sparkle with sin-

cerity, and deepen with the wisdom of his graver experiences, and the flow would often pass over the glittering spots of fancy, still it kept temperate and equable. It seldom mounted to a climax, for that would have been inconsistent with his mental methods, but he sometimes gathered the whole tone, whether earnest or tender, into a single figure that consigned the sentiment to the hearers, and made them as rich as himself with their portable form of his meaning: as when, for instance, in a discourse upon the uses of grief in making the soul loyal to God and in bringing the distant objects of faith very near to the suffering life, he summed it all up with saying, "so that every tear, as it gathers in the eye, shall become a transparent lens through which the glories of the heavenly world may be descried." His perceptive fancy scattered many such apt and gracious illustrations through his preaching, but the grave simplicity of his matter carried them along: they seemed to

be accidental suggestions during an absorbing talk. And in this way, without elaborate construction, and without a gradual swell of thought or emotion to imposing closes, he held high converse with the souls of his hearers, and they were hardly conscious how he obtained possession of their thoughts. But his discourse penetrated like a fair and bracing climate; all felt this radiation from his mind. It was like an open, gentle and palpable day, still it was one that filled all the space from earth to sky. His steadfast faith in the invisible objects of religion shone through it, his childlike piety shed its influence down. His reverence for the perfections of the Saviour claimed your sympathy, together with all pure affections that delight to find an unvexed medium: for he offered no obstruction, and made the air murky with no doubts, but as he permitted the substantial realities of the heavenly world to make their announcement through his humble and transparent heart, he mildly kindled with their passage.

His discourses were also distinguished for their particularity — that is to say, he never permitted a single practical and sensible element of their subject to escape. If it became necessary, his minuteness was jealous and microscopic, and he was sure to appropriate everything within the range of his fine perception. I remember a discourse which he preached in this city on occasion of the anniversary of some benevolent society. It gave the arguments in favor of charity, and exposed the habitual excuses of men who are unwilling to give. It had no pretension beyond completely exhausting the subject: it aimed to push a reluctant giver inch by inch from the ground he occupied. One objection after another was taken up and quietly disposed of: you wondered at the fertility of a sordid mind. The discourse did not appear to carry along any particular effect with it, for it consisted only in digging patiently from one point to another: but these parallels which he thus threw forward with-

out ostentation, brought you of a sudden, at the end of the discourse, into the enemy's citadel. And it became clear that a more effective discourse of the kind was never delivered: for it dislodged the covetous objector, who was not much impressed by the way, yet when it was all over, he felt that there was not a single mental reservation or subterfuge to shelter him. And when a man is actually stripped of every pretext, it becomes a last resort to give. There was much of this patient and unambitious wisdom in all of Mr. Peabody's discourses. And in that respect the man himself appeared, in the midst of his speaking, to be still observing and experiencing. Ever prudent and sensible, but penetrated by a lofty purpose, he strove to make a way into the natural understanding for the charities of Christ.

When all the papers which he wrote are collected, they will be found to cover an ample field, and to have called into exercise various attainments. The poetry of the West, the art

and life of Italy, the doctrines of the Unitarian faith, Colonization and the question of Slavery, are some of the subjects of his pen which occur to me without research. Wise, well-considered suggestion, taste, a delicate perception and an earnest disposition are the characteristics of his composition. I call to mind that his constitutional cautiousness, when brought out by the subject of slavery, was the cause of much misrepresentation and a violent imputation of unworthy motives to him. It seems as if men could not differ in this country without making a signal for accusations. And a man, equal in sincerity to any other, is not permitted to have a different kind of mind and temperament from the rest without suspicion. Let him exercise that mind under ever so grave a sense of responsibility to God, with pity ever so deep, and a desire to pour some remedial love into all the wounds of misery, still if he shrinks from the methods and propositions of others, he is ad-

judged to have some unclean and ignoble reason for it. The most conscientious man who ever stood in a pulpit is "joined to his idols," he wants to keep his place, or he has been covertly overpowered by the average opinion of his people, or, feeling clearly what he should speak, he shivers on the verge of dissent and dreads to take the plunge. Is it absurd to suggest that there are diversities of gifts, while there may be the same spirit? Your difference of gift is not presumptive evidence of my deficiency of the spirit. Is it too late to propose to these unmanly suspicions a truce based upon the essential differences among men's minds? It should protect every one except the indirect and supple time-server. But if it is determined to continue to attribute motives, let the motive for a special act be deduced from the general character. And a man's character is known by his prevailing fruits rather than by his occasional judgments. Perhaps the unclean will be unclean still. But it is as foolish

to suspect a pure, sensitive and disinterested character of an unworthy motive as it is to attribute the darkness to the stars. A more sweet and sanctified spirit than Mr. Peabody has not lived in these latter days. Self-aggrandizement never occurred to him. He was even morbidly fastidious lest he should appear to be seeking something for himself or for his family. And his cautiousness was as unprompted by calculation as his reverence. He expressed everywhere and upon all subjects the simple sincerity of his mental and spiritual state. The judgment of every man lies open to honorable criticism, but a soul that "doth not behave herself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth," is a shield against which the calumnious weapon strikes in vain. Surely the mind of a dying man must be somewhat earnest upon the question of Slavery, if he struggles to command the lingering remnant of his strength just long

enough that he may be carried where he can drop a vote for Freedom: and on this verge of time, when his soul must have been full of awe and expectation, and his dwelling full of imperious affections, he must needs call the venerable Quincy to his side, that he might learn, before he went, how the battle fared. If one rule of plain morality be needed to temper the aggravations of our public life, it is this: that a pure and earnest disposition should have immunity from unworthy imputations.

I cannot present Mr. Peabody to you in his parochial relations, except as I can infer from his personal qualities the nature of his influence as a pastor. But I have met with many traces of his beneficent passage. Under shadows I have found the wells which he sunk. Your memory will interfere at this point, and claim the tender privilege of bidding him live again in your past griefs. The chambers which have been so long reopened to life and joy, are darkened at this suggestion;

and as the vanished forms seem to reoccupy those beds of pain, you hear the sentences of his sweet and simple trust, as he implored the Father—that, if it were possible, the cup might pass. Perhaps, with little effort, the very words of the good cheer which he sent to the heart of your dying kindred will occur to you, and the look which he brought to their bedside; the welcome step is heard, the refreshment of that tender supplication is again expected. Go back, as to long-neglected graves: let the pity and intercession of his spirit bloom again upon them. Rehearse the sorrow which attracted to your side his confidence in God and his strong personal feeling of immortality. In those scenes his purest qualities will become clearer to you than in any other effort of your memory. They cluster around the very names of your departed ones; you cannot have them again separated from the faith and consolation of his presence. Now he too has gone to them, to hear their acknowledgment—“The trust which

you bade me have in God, the conviction of an immortal life which you sought to make me share, was not groundless: lo, share the substance of your hopes with us, O Pastor—welcome to the glad confirmations of a heavenly society.” There again he recognizes the children, whose early graves he strove to hide from you with comforting and triumphing prayers. Not successfully indeed—for the domestic yearning must always watch those gates of death. But now he finds your children’s spirits which passed safely through them, as he predicted to you, straight into the embrace of love. May he not be imparting to them what he knows concerning you?

Let me interrupt my efforts to bring the person of your former friend before you: for I feel that your memory must be far richer and more faithful than my speech. The secret of his character, which combined and harmonized all his gifts, and imbued them with a spirit of grace and serenity, can be shared only by his old and con-

stant friends. They understood the charm of his mingled tolerance and strictness, of his common-sense impregnated by the Spirit, of his wisdom, veiled by simplicity, of his grave, sweet, unobtrusive piety. The balance and excellent proportions of his nature affected them like a landscape composed of temperate, yet most gracious and exhilarating features. This harmony was his secret, and the friend who loveth in secret understands it best.

At length he was forced to resign the few occupations which his weakness had permitted. One thing after another fell from the hand that was too ill to hold them: but the spirit still lifted up with a manly vigor all its hopes and principles. That sun of his faith, which shed a cloudless noon over the departing footsteps of your kindred, was still at its zenith when the Father came to lead him also through the shadow. When at last he sought his bed, he dictated in a whisper his farewell to one of your number, whose friendship

had been not the least of the bright favors God had granted him. He lay in the midst of his books; another page would soon be turned. The useless pen was upon the desk: the mind which dropped it was about to grasp some other instrument of some more wonderful ministry. He had constantly before his eyes a drawing of the house in which he was born, and of the Mansion-House at Naushon where he renewed his strength so often. And thus he waited, thinking of the house not made with hands. But upon the morning of his departure, the domestic affections assembled strong and eager within him; he said much—he recalled with warmth and satisfaction his own father—he poured out to his physician all the gratitude of his meek, confiding spirit—and then, with the last injunction of love to his daughters we hear the last words of his earthly ministry: “Oh—my children, be good, Christian women.”

I wish those words could sound through all places where a womanly heart beats to hear them.

I wish they could have the wings of his fleeting spirit, and the weight of his last solicitude. Hear them — young women: they commend you to the humble and heavenly minded Savior. Let dying earnestness guide you away from all frivolous and cumbering things to the lowly Redeemer's feet.

My friends — thank God for a pure man in the midst of a corrupt generation. Keep bright these outlines of an unambitious and unselfish heart. They appear against fraud, and covetousness: they shine mildly amid the mad superstitions of the worshippers of this world. They seek to make a fresh delineation of the Gospel for tempted and forgetful men. Let this good minister of Christ pass whither he has received his call, but whatsoever things have been lovely in his life, whatsoever things of good report — think on these things.

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